

Reasons all Helping Professionals Should Understand Abuse Dynamics

1. Because any woman you meet might be impacted by abuse.

Practitioners, interning students and volunteers across all the legal and helping professions will meet women who are being abused at home. Many women will keep this information to themselves. She may not be ready to tell a professional about her situation, or she may not be ready to recognize her experience as outside the norm of relationship problems.

2. Because your intervention may not be effective if the abuse is unrecognized.

A common example of this point is how women are prescribed anti-depressants or other medications to treat “symptoms” of mental health problems that are really linked to abuse or are evidence of coping within an untenable situation at home. Prescribing a pill for depression won’t work if the “depression” is a logical reaction to life circumstances. Other presenting issues that could be indicators of abuse include anxiety, chronic pain, fatigue, or child behaviour problems.

3. Because your intervention may not be effective if she can’t feel safe.

Can she concentrate on what you say and do when pre-occupied with what happened last night? Or what will happen when she gets home? Addressing her need for safety is the priority for now. You can help by helping her prioritize her basic needs and make safety the first task.

4. Because even a well-meaning response could make her situation worse.

The *Medical Power and Control Wheel* (see over) was developed for use in a health care setting but the principles apply anywhere. It shows how some reactions by professionals could make a woman feel blamed, not believed or even put her at greater risk of harm by escalating the danger or increasing her sense of being trapped. It takes a lot of courage to reach out for help. If her partner learns she tried to disclose, his need to control may trigger an escalation in his threats or abuse.

5. Because domestic violence is not the sole responsibility of VAW services.

When we think about helping abused women we may think primarily about Violence against Women services, such as shelters. But all the helping professions play a role when women need and reach out for help. Health care providers have regular contact with women, especially during pregnancy and when her children are small. Marriage and family therapists can recognize when “relationship problems” are linked to coercive control. Know signs that a woman is in crisis, be prepared to respond in a sensitive way and refer her to the services in your area best matching her needs.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION!

An abusive partner may go to great lengths to cut a woman off from people who might recognize what is going on at home. His attendance with her at medical appointments, for example, looks like a caring response but it could be his attempt to monitor what she says and to whom. Asking questions about abuse in front of her partner (or her children) can put her at risk. If she discloses to you, don’t confront her partner or tell anyone else without first getting her permission. Ask what she wants and needs from you to help her be safe.

Adapted from *Helping an Abused Woman* by L. Baker & A. Cunningham (2008).
Further adapted by Liberty Lane Outreach Program (www.libertylane.ca)